United Nations A/62/PV.18

General Assembly

Sixty-second session

Official Records

18th plenary meeting
Friday, 5 October 2007, 10 a.m.
New York

President: Mr. Kerim ..... (The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia)

The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Agenda item 7 (*continued*)

Organization of work, adoption of the agenda and allocation of items

Letter dated 4 October 2007 from the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences addressed to the President of the General Assembly (A/62/338/Add.1)

The President: Before giving floor to the first speaker, I would like to invite the attention of the General Assembly to document A/62/338/Add.1, containing a letter dated 4 October 2007 from the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences addressed to the President of the General Assembly.

Members are aware that, pursuant to section I, paragraph 7, of Assembly resolution 40/243 of 18 December 1985, no subsidiary organ of the General Assembly should be permitted to meet at United Nations Headquarters during the main part of the regular session of the Assembly unless explicitly authorized by the Assembly.

Members will recall that, at its 1st plenary meeting of the sixty-second session, held on 18 September 2007, the General Assembly authorized a number of subsidiary organs to meet during the main part of the regular session of the Assembly.

Authorization is now sought for the Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Population Fund to hold one meeting during the main part of the sixty-second session of the General Assembly, on the strict understanding that the meeting would be accommodated within available facilities and services.

May I take it that it is the wish of the General Assembly to authorize the Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Population Fund to hold one meeting during the main part of the sixty-second session of the General Assembly?

It was so decided.

High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace

Agenda item 49 (*continued*)

Culture of peace

Reports of the Secretary-General (A/62/97 and A/62/337)

The President: I give the floor to Mr. H.E. Seif Ali Iddi, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of the United Republic of Tanzania.

Mr. Iddi (United Republic of Tanzania): The Government of the United Republic of Tanzania is pleased to participate in this dialogue on interreligious and intercultural cooperation. This meeting has come at an opportune time, when we need to encourage new thinking and dialogue on making the world more peaceful by building bridges among interfaith and

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multicultural institutions and by strengthening shared similarities among different faiths.

We thank the Secretary-General for his informative reports on this agenda item. We welcome the civil society hearing, as we believe that the civil society is a key partner in our resolve to promote interreligious and intercultural cooperation for peace.

The importance of dialogue and tolerance between religions and cultures to achieve peace in this globalized world cannot be overemphasized at a time when there are extremists bent on exploiting cultural and religious differences. We are thus encouraged that various initiatives are being undertaken by various organizations to promote interreligious and intercultural cooperation. Furthermore we commend the efforts undertaken by the United Nations system and in particular the leading role provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in promoting interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation in their programmes. The United Nations should use its strategic convening advantage to lead the world in this endeavour.

The Government of the United Republic of Tanzania acknowledges the initiatives of the Governments of Spain and Turkey in the formation of the Alliance of Civilizations. We congratulate Mr. Jorge Sampaio on his appointment as the High Representative for the Alliance.

We support the Alliance of Civilizations as a credible and viable attempt to diminish the dangerous tensions between diverse societies and their threat to international stability. The recommendations contained in the report of the High-level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations warrant our serious consideration. We look forward to receiving the report on the work of the Alliance as well as to its first international forum, to be held in Spain in 2008.

In Tanzania interreligious and intercultural cooperation is integrally woven into the social fabric of our nation. Tanzania is home to different races, more than 100 ethnic groups and several religions which coexist in harmony, with full freedom to express their cultural and religious diversity. Long before our independence, in 1961 for Tanzania Mainland and in 1964 for Zanzibar, our founding fathers of the independence movement deliberately focused on national unity by highlighting the assets of unity, such as a common language.

After independence, there have been conscious efforts to nurture unity in diversity through innovative national policies that promote and encourage a culture of tolerance and peaceful coexistence among our people. Several measures were taken by the Government in that regard. The most effective measure to address and dampen the politicization of religious and other identities included policies that promoted the principle of equity, particularly through access to education.

The institutions responsible for administering justice were also reformed to ensure that they accommodated the needs and aspirations of diverse groups. Furthermore, legal provisions were instituted forbidding the formation of organizations, such as political parties, that foment and amplify divisions based on race, religion or tribe. That separation of religion, race and ethnicity from politics has enabled Tanzania to have peacefully held four presidential elections.

The Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania pronounces Tanzania a secular State. The Constitution further provides for the right of every citizen to exercise the freedom of worship and to join or leave any religion of their choice. Moreover, religious tolerance is emphasized. Our penal code does not allow behaviour that is injurious to religious liberty. It should be underscored that the Government of Tanzania greatly values freedom of expression, but that freedom should be exercised with respect for other religions and cultures.

The Government has also undertaken measures to build a culture of peace and unity. That has been accomplished through many avenues, such as media messages, school curricula and our national unifying symbols and heritage, including our national heroes and youth movements. The Government has further encouraged and assisted religious organizations in holding dialogues amongst themselves. To this end, Muslim and Christian leaders in Tanzania have formed a joint Commission on Peace, Development and Reconciliation. It is a forum for dialogue and has contributed to engendering understanding and accommodation.

In addition, religious leaders and organizations have worked hand-in-hand with the Government in

combating social problems that could be avenues for disenchantment and thus provide recruiting grounds for radical fringe elements in society, sowing seeds of misunderstanding and discord in society. We should not underestimate the capacity of those elements to develop divisive ideologies to incite and exploit social deprivation, poverty and religious differences in order to advocate violence. Those people and groups transcend national and international boundaries. We must endeavour to address the root causes of frustrations that could be the breeding ground for racial politics and ideologies in the name of religion.

Religious intolerance is fuelled by ignorance of what other faiths stand for. It is that ignorance that is exploited by those who have an agenda seeking to advance political goals through violence justified on religious grounds. Therefore, increased education and communication aimed at promoting better understanding and tolerance should be accorded a high priority by all of us.

Concerted efforts from all of us are needed as we deal with religiously motivated political violence and terrorism. The Government of Tanzania reiterates its readiness to share our national experience in order to further this dialogue, with a view to promoting understanding and tolerance among diverse cultures and religions in order to contribute towards world peace and security.

The President: I now call on H.E. Mr. Anton Niculescu, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Romania.

Mr. Niculescu (Romania): I am deeply honoured to address the High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. I would like to begin by thanking the President of the General Assembly for organizing this Dialogue on one of the most important issues of our time.

Romania fully endorses the statement of the Portuguese presidency of the European Union, which was made yesterday.

In an increasingly globalized world, where we live together and interact with each other, intercultural dialogue will be a permanent process requiring worldwide participation at all levels. We must put intercultural and interreligious dialogue at the top of our political agenda, because no progress is possible without joint responsibility and a sharing of the task by all. We welcome foremost the interactive hearing involving representatives of civil society as an important part of our debate.

The rich cultural diversity of my country could not have been better illustrated than by the logo chosen for the city of Sibiu, which, along with Luxemburg, is the 2007 European Capital of Culture: "Sibiu — City of Culture — City of Cultures". The geographical position of Romania at the crossroads of Central and South-Eastern European cultures is reflected in both the variety and the richness of our cultural diversity. The social landscape is characterized by a variety of cultural traditions, including Hungarian, Roma, German, Ukrainian, Jewish, Turkish, Tartar, Russian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Slovak, Greek, Polish, Italian, Armenian and Croatian.

Romania is also a place of peaceful coexistence between different religions and confessions: Orthodox, Roman and Greek Catholic, Jewish, Protestant, Muslim and others. The churches and religious communities contribute to better harmony among people by promoting mutual respect within the framework of shared fundamental values. The Romanian Government is working closely with religious communities in promoting interreligious dialogue.

In this context, in September 2007, Romania hosted the Third European Ecumenical Assembly for the first time in a largely Orthodox country. The Assembly gathered a large number of representatives, not only from European institutions, countries and churches, but also representatives of Muslim and Jewish communities in Europe, as well as from churches in America, Asia and Africa. The Assembly's message, adopted in Sibiu, encourages peaceful dialogue between religions, better knowledge of all religions, and respect for freedom of religion, human dignity and human rights.

Romania welcomes the Alliance of Civilizations and expresses its full support and willingness to be associated with its activities, for we think the Alliance has great potential to promote peace by means of intercultural and interreligious dialogue. We are fully satisfied with the conclusions of the first ministerial meeting of the group of friends, which took place last week, and we consider the Alliance ready to make a major step forward in achieving tangible results.

As the Presidency of the European Union stated earlier, we think that Europe, along with other regions

of the world, could play a key role in reaching the objectives of the Alliance of Civilizations. History has shaped Europe as a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multireligious continent. However, today's new realities, including migration and globalization, will enrich its physiognomy even more.

Romania, now at a happy turning point in its history, is changing even faster and becoming more urban, more open, deeply democratic and more multicultural. Thus, the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, to be organized by the European Union next year, represents a great opportunity for my country to deal with the more complex cultural environment and to acquire new intercultural dialoguing skills through contacts with other European countries and neighbouring regions. Yet, in my opinion, one of the most important results of the European Year will be the understanding of our unity in diversity and the awareness that different cultures, religions and beliefs are bound to enrich our lives and reflect the same universal values.

In that regard, Romania has already prepared a national strategy for intercultural dialogue with a special focus on the involvement of civil society, especially young people and children. Romania has also participated in the project of the Council of Europe, working on its white paper on intercultural dialogue, which seeks to develop a coherent policy aimed at promoting intercultural dialogue within Europe and with its neighbours.

I would like to refer to my own region, the Black Sea region, a distinct geographical area strategically located at the intersection of Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East. This area, characterized by countries with very different histories and cultures, has many opportunities, but also faces challenges and difficulties that require a comprehensive response. In our view, given the confluence of cultures in the Black Sea area, intercultural and interreligious dialogue could play an increasingly important role in advancing regional cooperation and in solving some of the regional difficulties.

Therefore, we consider that international initiatives in the field of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, including those carried out under the aegis of the United Nations, can be beneficial. In this context, we intend to propose a project aiming to promote the intercultural and interreligious dialogue in the Black Sea region, which could be developed in cooperation with the Alliance of Civilizations.

The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity adopted by the heads of States from the South-East Europe region in Bucharest on 7 June 2007 describes multiculturalism as not only a multitude of cultures with equal status, but also a system based on common values and the development of peace, and interculturality as the constant interaction between cultures in the spirit of building bridges among peoples.

I hope that our debate will contribute to strengthening our commitment for peace, and that other similar initiatives will follow aimed at broadening our intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

The President: I give the floor to His Excellency Hans Winkler, State Secretary for European and International Affairs of Austria.

Mr. Winkler (Austria): Austria fully supports the statement by the Presidency of the European Union but would like to add a few thoughts.

The existence of intolerance, racism and other forms of discrimination is an undeniable fact. Such phenomena exist in all our countries and increasingly so. The news we encounter almost every day is most alarming: immigrants or asylum seekers are being harassed or attacked; debates about publications that are offensive to some, while others insist on the principle of freedom of expression, get out of hand and sometimes even lead to outbursts of violence. Religious symbols are becoming a matter of contention. In short, interreligious and intercultural relations within societies and beyond national borders are becoming strained.

The disquieting truth is that all of this is happening despite the laudable efforts of many well-established organizations and institutions that work to combat various forms of intolerance, despite numerous studies, reports and despite a seemingly endless number of resolutions and action plans.

Must we then throw up our hands and, discouraged, admit defeat, discontinue our efforts and accept the state of affairs as it is? The answer is obvious: of course not! We must not leave the field to those who sow discord and preach hate and intolerance. By giving up our fight against intolerance

and bigotry, we would leave those who want to destroy our values victorious.

Today we have the chance and the duty to learn from the mistakes and omissions of the past. Whether religiously, racially or economically motivated, whether in the East, West, North or South, we must stand up against all forms of extremism and the abuse of religious convictions and cultural traditions.

Dialogue is the indispensable fabric that holds each democratic society together and is the prerequisite for the peaceful coexistence of different cultures and religions. Dialogue communicates what unites us but also what irritates us.

Austria is committed to protecting and promoting cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance. Each country has special challenges to meet. While the problems are global, the answers must be made to fit the particular situations in each country.

We in Austria have a longstanding tradition as a platform for meaningful dialogue between religions and civilizations, in particular between Christianity and Islam. We will continue to remain engaged, because we know that we are not immune against the challenges that many countries in Europe and elsewhere are facing today.

We believe that the United Nations is the best framework to promote such a dialogue on a global scale by setting standards, including legal standards, and by being the vanguard in the protection of human rights. States bear a large share of the responsibility to fight intolerance and discrimination. It is incumbent upon them to create the legal and institutional framework in which discrimination can be prevented or, if need be, in which transgressions will ultimately be prosecuted and punished by independent courts. By the same token, political leadership is required to ensure the necessary political, social and economic framework where free citizens can exercise their rights and are protected against violence and aggression.

The State cannot, however, shoulder this responsibility alone. Civil society plays an important part, and religious leaders have to assume a special responsibility, as was underlined very eloquently yesterday by Minister Alkalaj of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and by others. The fundamental values inherent in all world religions clearly mandate all such leaders to explicitly reject the preaching of hate and incitement to violence. Radicalization, disguised in religious terms, seems to take place in a kind of "identity vacuum", where young people who lack social or economic perspectives struggle with their own identity.

It is easy to produce clichés and misrepresent what is foreign. Mutual trust, on the other hand, is much more difficult to achieve. Nobody is born a terrorist or an extremist and that is true for all religions and ideologies. Education is the key to reaching out to the hearts and minds of young people. Access to knowledge and information and clear perspectives are the driving force for change in society and for a peaceful and secure coexistence of all citizens.

Like many countries, we have tried to find our own answers by learning from the best practices of others. For instance, a number of steps have been taken to promote dialogue with Islam. University master's degree programmes on Islamic religious pedagogy, the establishment of faculties of Islamic theology, as well as imam training programmes at European universities and teacher training colleges are just some examples which might facilitate a fruitful dialogue.

Dialogue also needs structure and continuity. Returning to the example of my own country, the Austrian Government, together with the Islamic community in Austria, recently initiated and supported a conference of European imams in Vienna. The declaration adopted on that occasion clearly states the necessity of developing a Muslim-European identity and leaves no doubt as to the compatibility of Islam, democracy, rule of law and fundamental freedoms. The declaration also addresses gender issues and states, inter alia, that any kind of violation of women's rights should be strongly censured: forced marriage, genital mutilation, honour killings and violence within the family have no foundation in Islam.

It is clear that women, and this is true of all societies, have an important role to play in this dialogue, both in community work and in politics in general, including in international peace processes. In May of this year, Ms. Ursula Plassnik, the Austrian Foreign Minister, hosted a conference of women leaders networking for peace and security in the Middle East with a number of eminent persons from different countries in the region. The clear message from this conference was that women are ready to reach out to each other across national, ethnic and

religious barriers and to engage in constructive dialogue.

We have no time to lose. Otherwise we risk seeing our societies taken hostage by extremists on all sides. The success or failure of our efforts today will determine the future of our children.

The President: I give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Aly Maher Elsayed, Special Representative of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Egypt.

Mr. Elsayed (Egypt) (*spoke in Arabic*): It gives me great pleasure to represent the Arab Republic of Egypt in this High-level Dialogue. I would like to say at the outset that holding this dialogue in the United Nations is essential to the realization of much-desired peace in the world.

While religions may differ in some aspects of doctrine, they undoubtedly share common values and principles regarding respect for human beings and human dignity and life. In essence, they reject violence and war. Therefore, dialogue should begin by addressing these common values, not matters of rapprochement or integration of faiths. What we really need is understanding and rapprochement between people in different communities.

We are all aware that the phrase used to greet people in Islam, the religion of tolerance, is "al-salaamu alaikum" ("peace be upon you"). The word "peace" is in itself one of God's Holy Names. Moreover, the teachings of Christianity revere the meaning of peace and call for its reign on earth, while "shalom", the Hebrew word for "peace", is used to greet people in Judaism.

Hence, those who attempt to exploit religions and cultures to justify violence are in fact undermining such religions and their lofty messages. Dialogue alone can build bridges between peoples, regardless of differences of belief and conception. It also allows for learning about the other, both within groups and as individuals, and for the understanding and acceptance of the other. Individuals are usually wary of what they do not know and fear what they do not understand. Dialogue, accordingly, is the appropriate approach for learning, understanding, rapprochement and cooperation for the attainment of common goals, particularly in the twenty-first century, the era of globalization, where no culture can afford to become isolationist or to avoid interaction with other cultures.

Peace is not merely a philosophy or a lofty principle. It is a way of life and constitutes civilized conduct for the good of humankind. It is therefore imperative that we all commit ourselves to the foundations of peace, which are inseparable from respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations.

Respect for cultural identities is the point of departure for the successful conclusion of our dialogue, as it will generate acceptance by all for interaction that encourages mutual understanding, spreading the spirit of tolerance and utilizing the capabilities of new information technology to disseminate knowledge and correct stereotypes and misconceptions.

Our human civilization and common heritage rest on the valuable contributions of all civilizations and cultures. I recall here the great role of Muslim scientists, philosophers and writers, among them, for example, al-Khawarizmi, al-Razi, al-Farabi, Alhazen, and Ibn Khaldun, to mention only a few. Regrettably, some seek to identify Islam with extremism, violence and terrorism, while Islam is innocent of all these allegations.

The preamble to the constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization declares that "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed". Dialogue is the best way of achieving that goal.

I would also like to add that this dialogue is not the concern of Governments or religious leaders alone. It is, rather, the concern of each and every individual in our societies, all non-governmental organizations, all thinkers and writers, and all who are truly concerned about the future of mankind. The most perilous challenge to international peace and security is the proliferation of violence and the use of force as a means of expression, especially in light of the inability and failure of the international community — and I apologize for saying this — as represented in the United Nations, to settle chronic political and economic problems. Such failures breed feelings of injustice, oppression and double standards and promote competitiveness over materialistic and political gains.

These are all catalysts for conflict, not for dialogue, and require us to double our efforts within

this Organization to settle these conflicts and assist developing countries in realizing the legitimate aspirations of their peoples for development and prosperity, without attached conditions, and within an international framework characterized by democracy and equality, free from politicization and selectivity. Indeed, only through collective action and dialogue can we achieve the desired results.

In recent years a number of bodies and conferences have addressed the issue of interreligious and intercultural dialogue. That in itself is a positive element, provided that we coordinate the various initiatives, so that they work in tandem and do not compete or work at cross purposes.

In Egypt, we are currently preparing for the meetings and workshops of next year's Dialogue Among Peoples and Cultures of the Mediterranean and the Gulf, to be held in Alexandria. The Institute for Peace Studies, chaired by Her Excellency Mrs. Suzanne Mubarak, was designated to organize this third gathering, following the first such event, held in Paris under the patronage of former President Jacques Chirac, and the second, held in Seville, Spain.

This dialogue should translate our common endeavour to promote tolerance, respect for religions and beliefs and cultural diversity into a concrete plan of action and practical and viable programmes. We have high hopes that the General Assembly Dialogue will result in concerted action aimed at mutual understanding, bridging gaps and the acceptance of the other. In this regard, Egypt is fully ready to contribute to and participate in this process.

The President: I call next on His Excellency Mr. Fedja Starčević, Assistant Minister for Multilateral Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia.

Mr. Starčević (Serbia): In a world where no country is perfectly homogeneous, calls for the recognition of different ethnic, religious and language groups and values have increased. What is needed is to develop a sense of respect for the other, which would serve as a basis for mutual respect, understanding and knowledge. UNESCO calls it "tolerance", even though that word does not seem to include all the necessary ingredients. Yet, the practical understanding of tolerance does indeed include this sense of respect that we seek to increase.

There is potentially no greater agent of tolerance than religion. All religions preach morality, civility, kindness, compassion, love, tolerance and peace. So prominent is the teaching of universal love among all religions that it could be taken as a common goal of them all. Yet, religion has been often misused in the cause of division, discrimination and death. It is sometimes turned from a personal matter of faith and sustenance into a weapon of power and coercion. From war to discrimination and other violations of human rights, what we see all too frequently is a lack of tolerance and understanding between religious traditions.

But one thing should be clear: religions themselves are not to blame. The problem is usually not with the faith, but with the faithful. Each religion is a path towards the same goal of salvation, and therefore each religion must be given utmost respect. No one religion can claim monopoly and say that it is the only way to the truth. All great religions are equal streams of civilized human coexistence, parallel depositories of spiritual wisdom and complementary sources of social guidance. All must therefore learn to give due respect to each other and to each other's view of human life. The key to this is to foster knowledge, understanding and profound respect for all the world's spiritual traditions.

Diversity of religious and cultural heritage is, at the same time, a characteristic of one's identity and a means of reconciliation. The latter is particularly relevant for South-Eastern Europe, which experienced ethnic and civil wars and devastation at the end of the twentieth century.

People in our region, the Balkans, have throughout history faced many confrontations of civilizations: mighty empires vied with each other for supremacy over our territories. And those conflicts often had a religious dimension as well. As a result, this created an ambivalent cultural, psychological and political legacy, where people of other customs and faiths were looked at with both mistrust and fear. However, there followed a long period in the former Yugoslavia when coexistence and tolerance were fostered. Yugoslav nations, divided between Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholicism, Islam and Judaism, learned to live side by side and created a new political and cultural identity for themselves.

The harmony thus created was destroyed by the surge of nationalism in the 1990s. However, the peoples and the new States that emerged in the territory that was Yugoslavia, following normalization of relations among them, have all turned to the promotion of democracy and respect for human rights, and they have jointly committed themselves to reconciliation, cooperation and European integration.

For the Republic of Serbia, as a multi-ethnic and multireligious society, such an orientation is of paramount importance. Our constitution and our laws guarantee equality on ethnic, religious or every other ground. Religious communities carry out their activities in Serbia in full freedom. Religious affiliation is a private matter for every individual and belongs to the body of individual human rights.

In cooperation with other countries of the Western Balkans and of South-Eastern Europe, with the support and assistance of European and international organizations, Serbia has made considerable efforts to promote dialogue and reconciliation in our region, with a view to strengthening peace, cooperation and stability. Encouraging results have been achieved, so much so that the Balkans is increasingly viewed as a region of fruitful cooperation instead of conflict, as in the past.

An important role in this regard has been played by both governmental institutions and civil society. UNESCO initiated the first Summit of heads of State of the South-East Europe region, which was held in Ohrid, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, in 2003. That was the first time that all heads of State of the region had gathered together since the outbreak of conflicts in the Balkans.

Since then, South-East Europe Summits are held every year. The declaration adopted at the last South-East Europe Summit, in Bucharest in June 2007, is an expression of the efforts of the countries and peoples of the region to develop cooperation in the field of culture in order to promote cultural diversity and knowledge of one another as a bridge between cultural heritage and the culture of the future.

However, the current developments related to Serbia's southern province of Kosovo are in stark contrast to this constructive atmosphere of tolerance, dialogue, cooperation and interaction in the region. For the last eight years, Kosovo, under the administration of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo, has been the single region in Europe where the enjoyment of basic human rights has not been possible, as a result of the lack of security, freedom of movement and work for the Serbian community. Serbian homes and churches have been demolished and acts of violence against Serbs and other non-Albanians have been committed. Their continuous existence in Kosovo has thus been put in jeopardy.

In May 2005, UNESCO organized an international donors conference in Paris to protect and restore cultural heritage in Kosovo. An inventory has been made of 48 Orthodox, 14 Muslim and 13 secular heritage sites to be protected and to be restored to their former glory. Kosovo today is a region where these and similar activities, as well as all other possible measures to overcome fear and suspicion and increase confidence and cooperation among different communities are most needed. Achieving positive results in such activities would greatly improve the quality of life for all in Kosovo and would make the achievement of a constructive political solution more possible than is now the case. Serbia is ready and willing to engage in such pursuits, guided by the desire to contribute to making all parts of the Balkan region a zone of friendship and cooperation. We hope and believe that our common future lies in that direction.

Allow me to say in conclusion that Serbia will continue to support all activities aimed at interreligious and intercultural dialogue in the interest of peace and understanding in the world.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Pjer Šimunović, Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs and European Integration of Croatia.

Mr. Šimunović (Croatia): I am honoured to address this meeting today, as it is further adding to the political importance that Member States and international organizations attach to the fundamentally important topic of interreligious and intercultural dialogue. I would also like to thank you, Mr. President, for providing us with this opportunity to share and advance our reflections and learn from each other's experiences.

Croatia has been situated at the crossroads of different cultures and religions for centuries. Today, it is still where Central and Eastern Europe meet the Mediterranean and where Christianity meets Islam, providing a rich cultural and religious diversity.

Croatia is fully committed to combating intolerance and discrimination and to promoting mutual respect and understanding. At the national level, Croatia recognizes and protects freedom of religion and belief as a fundamental human right, as stated in the constitution. We are proud to say that there are 42 registered religious groups in Croatia, of which 14 enjoy direct annual financial support for their work from the Government. All religious groups are independent of the State.

Each State has an obligation to protect freedom of religion or belief and to guarantee to all religious communities the freedom to gather in places of worship. However, we must remember that a great part of responsibility for promoting interreligious and intercultural understanding also lies in the hands of religious leaders. It is their moral duty to spread the message of peace and cooperation with members of other religions in order to create a common future and society. Education, tolerance and respect for fellow human beings are means of creating a peaceful world. That goal requires joint efforts at all levels — from the international and national levels down to the level of every single person.

Croatia welcomes and follows with great interest the increased attention to the theme of interreligious and intercultural understanding by Governments, United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, religious communities and civil society. Only through such partnerships can we find effective solutions.

In that respect, allow me to welcome the work of the Alliance of Civilizations and the appointment by the Secretary-General of the United Nations High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, His Excellency Mr. Jorge Sampaio, earlier this year.

As a candidate for membership in the European Union, Croatia aligns itself with the statement delivered by Portugal on behalf of the European Union. Croatia welcomes and supports the recent decision by the European Union to declare 2008 the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. Croatia is also following with great interest the work done through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the European Neighbourhood Policy.

Defending the freedom of religion and belief, as well as cultural diversity, lies at the core of peace, justice and, consequently, security. As a candidate for a non-permanent seat on the Security Council for 2008-2009, the Republic of Croatia is very well aware of that sensitive interdependence and stands ready to work with other members for a peaceful, tolerant and considerate world.

The President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Fahd Bin Abdulrahman Alrajeh, Capital Minister for Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Alrajeh (Saudi Arabia) (*spoke in Arabic*): First, we would like to congratulate you, Sir, on your election as President of the General Assembly at its sixty-second session. We are confident that you will discharge your tasks with wisdom and skill. Also, we thank those who called for and organized this important meeting.

We would like to contribute some ideas and encouragement on the subject of dialogue, which has its foundations in the Millennium Declaration of 2000 (resolution 55/2). There, tolerance was defined as an essential value for international relations in the twenty-first century and as a contribution to a culture of peace and dialogue among civilizations. Throughout history, dialogue per se has never been controversial; cultures made use of it among themselves, and in that way humanity gained stable values to which we all aspire, such as tolerance, coexistence, cooperation, the rejection of violence, hatred, discord, tension and vengeance and the nurturing of peace.

Sadly, we have been late to submit this subject to public debate, and it has been overtaken by developments in human civilization: interests have become interdependent and the rights and duties of peoples and nations have become enshrined in law. Still, to speak about dialogue now is certainly better than further delay. Clearly, talk of a "clash of civilizations" is in response to those who promote terrorism, but it constitutes support for their schemes, especially when they exploit religion for their evil purposes and in furtherance of economic and political interests. To achieve a decisive victory over terrorism we must successfully undermine extremist thinking that rejects dialogue and coexistence.

It is also essential that we adopt international legislation calling for respect for religions and criminalizing attacks on religious symbols. Saudi Arabia also warns of exploitation of the counter-terrorism campaign by the forces of extremism and the advocates of a clash among cultures and civilizations in order to divert the fight against terrorism from its

course and its objectives. Here, it is important to stress that no religion calls for terrorism; all religions call for noble values. It is not right to denounce a religion for the offences of some extremists.

The media bear an important responsibility to disseminate correct ideas about other people while avoiding stereotype, cliché, misconception and prejudgement. This can help bring about a successful dialogue among cultures and civilizations.

Allow me to recall here that throughout history the peoples of the Middle East have always built cultural bridges of contact and communication among civilizations. Those countries have played a noble role in calling for the convening of many conferences at all levels in order to strengthen the ideals of cooperation and tolerance among civilizations.

At the national level, and convinced of the importance of interaction with a world of many cultures and civilizations, of a culture of peace and of finding common ground for cooperation among civilizations, Saudi Arabia has called for a dialogue among civilizations in which all Muslim States would participate.

The General Assembly consequently adopted resolution 53/42 on 14 January 1998, proclaiming the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations. That has made it possible to shed light on the tolerant face of Islam and to create a culture of peace and cooperation among peoples of the world.

Our King, the Servant of the Two Holy Places, has often stressed the importance of dialogue among civilizations, peaceful coexistence and of establishing lines of communication between peoples, as opposed to the idea of confrontation and the clash of civilizations. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is continuing its efforts in this area by participating in national, regional and international initiatives such as the Alliance of Civilizations and the Panel of the Wise. We also supported the holding of the International Forum for a Culture of Peace and Dialogue among Civilizations in the Third Millennium and have established a multidisciplinary group of Saudi specialists to engage in dialogue with our foreign partners at the annual National Festival of Heritage and Culture. We also support other initiatives on dialogue among civilizations and the culture of peace, including websites and stamps, that promote and enhance the importance of dialogue among civilizations.

I now turn to the issue of religious and cultural tolerance. My country hosts more than 7 million foreigners of different religions and ethnicities, from more than 70 countries, who enjoy full rights and live in dignity. While differences of position are a natural result of diversity — even within a particular religion or culture — they should not lead to confrontations or clashes with that religion or culture. On the contrary, we must find common ground for coexistence and cooperation, which humankind has managed to do throughout the ages. We are confident that our project on cultures and civilizations will succeed, thanks to the efforts of the Panel of the Wise, and that we will begin a constructive and purposeful dialogue to consolidate these values, which will enable everyone to benefit from peace and prosperity. If we achieve that, the critics of this movement will not be able to ignore it. If we are optimistic, the future will smile upon us.

Mr. Rosselli (Uruguay), Vice-President, took the Chair.

Spreading a culture of peace and tolerance is a global effort in which everyone must participate if we are to create a peaceful environment that will enable future generations to achieve progress, prosperity and cooperation.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I call next on His Excellency Mr. Art Jacobi, Director for Human Rights and Good Governance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.

Mr. Jacobi (Netherlands): In addition to the intervention made yesterday by the presidency of the European Union, with which my delegation fully aligns itself, I would like to make a few observations from a more national perspective.

The Netherlands has a long-standing record in the field of the international protection of freedom of religion and belief. For instance, the Netherlands played an important role during the negotiations on the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (resolution 36/55). Its article 8 consists of the so-called Dutch clause, which states,

> "Nothing in the present Declaration shall be construed as restricting or derogating from any right defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Human Rights."

That principle remains as important today as it was 25 years ago. It also applies to the subject of our meeting: interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace. The Netherlands Government fully supports the underlying idea that a global understanding of our cultural, social, ethnic and religious backgrounds is more essential than ever, especially because the world has become a global village. What happens in one part of the world affects other parts of the world: tensions among various groups in our societies do not remain unnoticed abroad. Hence, dialogue among all and at all levels — local, national, regional and international — is a useful instrument for promoting understanding and for reducing such tensions.

At the same time, whatever we do remains subject to the aforementioned Dutch clause: our international human rights system provides the umbrella under which dialogue becomes possible, and it provides the firm and fertile soil upon we can build and grow.

As the Prime Minister of the Netherlands stated in his address to the General Assembly last week (see A/62/PV.8), values connect us across our cultures and religions. We must not allow cultural or religious differences to create barriers to open dialogue. The Netherlands wants to join forces with all those who want to promote tolerance and dialogue among civilizations. But we must not allow such dialogue to call into question the universal validity of our common values.

Against that background, the Netherlands Government has supported and will continue to support a wide range of initiatives. In 2006, we contributed to the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1981 United Nations Declaration, held in Prague. On that occasion, all participants underlined the importance of that instrument as a basis for further interreligious and intercultural dialogue. In June 2008, the Asia-Europe Meeting Interfaith Dialogue will be held in Amsterdam. That meeting, which the Netherlands organizes together with Thailand, will not be confined to discussions among participants. Our capital city, Amsterdam, is actively involved, and participants will be invited to visit a number of grass-roots activities in Amsterdam, which is, as members may be aware, home to 177 nationalities and to citizens who are from a wide variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds.

That reflects a second principle, which we cherish when we speak about dialogue. Events — such as today's — that bring together representatives of Governments are, of course, important, but real dialogue can be successful only if it includes our citizens. I am therefore very pleased at the presence, today and yesterday, of so many representatives of civil society and at the opportunity to interact with them during the panel discussions. Non-governmental organizations have a key role to play in developing grass-roots activities. With that in mind, the Netherlands is considering supporting the idea of the establishment of a clearinghouse by Mr. Jorge Sampaio, High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations, so that we can learn from both the successes and the caveats relating to dialogue activities at the local, national, regional and international levels.

Finally, religious leaders bear a major responsibility in this area, especially when it comes to interreligious dialogue. They can provide the right example: without denying the principles of their own faith, they can make it clear that one should also have respect for other religions and for those who choose not to adhere to any religion or to change their religion. Of course, every religion, almost by definition, claims to represent the truth. That can lead to the exclusion of others who believe in another truth. The more contacts take place among religious leaders and their followers, the more we will learn about the backgrounds of various religions and the easier it will become to truly understand and respect one another.

On 10 December 2008, on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the city of The Hague, in cooperation with our Ministry of Foreign Affairs, will organize a conference with many religious leaders from all over the world. We are hopeful that the leaders will, on that occasion, reaffirm their commitment to human rights and to the promotion of mutual understanding and respect.

The Netherlands will continue to remain actively engaged in initiatives aimed at reducing tensions among and within our respective societies. No country can succeed on its own though, and I therefore hope that this meeting will strengthen our joint efforts to overcome our differences and make this global village a place of peace and justice.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. Viktor Voronin, Deputy Head of the State Committee on Nationalities and Religions of Ukraine.

Mr. Voronin (Ukraine) (*spoke in Russian*): Ukraine has created the necessary legal basis for the freedom of activity of religious organizations. Each organization is guaranteed the right to practice its religion and conduct worship services. Parents have the right to raise their children in accordance with their religious beliefs and in full privacy. The number of religious organizations in Ukraine has nearly tripled over the past 15 years. Proof of this religious renaissance is the fact that there are now 406 functioning monasteries, a nearly seven-fold increase, and more than 300 philanthropic missions are in operation.

The establishment of a constitutional and legal basis for freedom of belief and religion, along with the constitutional guarantees for preserving and developing cultural, linguistic and religious identities, has helped to strengthen the religious infrastructure of ethnic and religious minorities and has enriched their religious and spiritual life. Often divisions along national lines enter the religious sphere, and the religious needs of believers are met through services in their language in accordance with the religious traditions and customs of those ethnic groups. Most religious organizations in Ukraine reflect the characteristic spiritual, educational and religious needs of particular ethnic minorities. There are about 1500 religious communities within the national minorities, making up about 15 per cent of all religious organizations. Despite the complexities and diversity of religious life, Ukrainian society is convinced of the need to affirm general standards of the freedom of belief, as contained in international instruments signed by Ukraine and reflected in our domestic legislation.

Furthermore, social relations involving the freedom of conscience are influenced by the laws and activities of State authorities. Usually legal norms merely reflect prevailing spiritual and moral traditions. Given the multi-ethnicity and the many religions of Ukraine, tolerance arises in social consciousness through a national dialogue with the participation of representatives of government and of religious and social institutions. This country-wide religious dialogue is characterized by participation on many levels and there is a free exchange of views, a comparison of positions and an effort to resolve existing problems.

However, the form and content of the dialogue are not just limited to this, because they also provide for an active relationship and practical and agreed actions on the part of the participants as they seek to reach mutual understanding and agreement. Representatives of the religious world in Ukraine are very interested in establishing a dialogue with representatives of other faiths and teachings and in tolerance in their relations with them. I are pleased to note that this year in cooperation with non-governmental organizations in Kiev the summit on peace and tolerance was successfully held, which included the spiritual leaders of Eastern Orthodoxy, Islam and Judaism.

Although we speak of the creation of religious pluralism in Ukraine as a fait accompli, it should be remembered that this pluralism underlies the constructive interfaith relations and the unified multi-religious space that have been established. Religious pluralism means not only the presence of a number of religions but also their legal equality. In that context, the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations has a great positive influence on relations between the State and religious groups, strengthening harmony and tolerance among religious organizations.

The priorities of State policy in Ukraine regarding religion provide for a deepening of understanding between representatives of various faiths, so as to eliminate prejudice and mistrust.

Another priority area is the humanitarian sphere. Through their interaction, religious organizations develop common positions on urgent contemporary problems, in particular, problems involving globalization, the environment protection of human life and the institution of the family.

Another priority area in State policy is to ensure interethnic and interreligious harmony and ban the activities of extremist organizations and the dissemination of their hateful views. Various measures carried out by State authorities, together with the strategy of cooperation between the State and religious institutions, will help to create an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance.

Ukraine supports the principles of the separation of Church and State and non-interference in the internal affairs of religious groups and will continue to support in many ways the functioning of religious organizations and to carefully protect the rights of believers. We expect that this will lead to a strengthening of peace and harmony and the spirit of tolerance and mutual respect in society.

Ukraine supports the efforts of the new President of the General Assembly to activate the dialogue on intercultural and interreligious understanding and on cooperation for peace. We not only are pleased to participate in this meeting and welcome this initiative, but we are also ready to get actively involved in joint efforts at the United Nations and at the regional and subregional levels, in particular in the Black Sea Cooperation Organization. We are ready to do this thanks to the fact that we are one of the few countries in the post-Soviet area that has been able to avoid open conflicts despite difficult interreligious and interethnic problems.

This entitles us to invite others to follow our example and work for understanding and tolerance and respect for religious freedoms and cultural diversity, both within our country as well as at the regional and subregional levels. We can assure you that the United Nations and its leadership can continue to count on Ukraine to promote interreligious and interethnic tolerance in the future.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on Her Excellency Ms. Byrganym Aitimova, Chairperson of the delegation of Kazakhstan.

Ms. Aitimova (Kazakhstan): First of all, I would like to congratulate you on your election to this high office and express confidence that under your skilful stewardship the sixty-second session of the United Nations General Assembly will be fruitful and successful.

The emergence of new challenges and threats to humankind, particularly the rise of international terrorism and religious extremism, often fed by interfaith tensions and hidden under the principles of religions, makes the need for religious education, tolerance and mutual understanding and respect of various cultures and civilizations even more urgent. Seeking an accord between religions and the peaceful coexistence of ethnic groups is a crucially important element of the process of maintaining global security.

Therefore, we attach great importance to this high-level dialogue and its informal interactive meeting with civil society, which seek to further develop the outcomes of the key conferences and initiatives on the theme of dialogue among cultures and religions. We consider them all to be mutually inclusive, reinforcing and interrelated.

Kazakhstan acclaims the significant work of the United Nations system and its agencies in addressing challenges and seeking ways forward so as to find policies, structures and programmes that can foster a culture of peace. We welcome the outcomes of the informal thematic debate in the General Assembly on civilizations and the challenge for peace, which was held in May 2007 and produced a number of recommendations.

As a member of the Group of Friends of the Alliance of Civilizations, Kazakhstan commends the valuable contribution of the Alliance and expresses its full support for the report of the High-level Group and the implementation plan based on it for 2007-2009, which is a guiding document with concrete proposals for the establishment of a network of relations among the various civilizations through activities in the areas of youth, education, media and migration.

We strongly believe that the culture of peace starts within us when we learn how to respect the inherent value and dignity of other cultures and religions and when we allow them to keep up their traditions. The moral standing of any society is judged by how it treats other nations and other peoples' cultures. Intolerance and conflict can be prevented through tireless efforts in day-to-day activities and by taking timely and concrete action at the local, national, regional and international levels.

Kazakhstan is home to 130 ethnic groups and 45 religious confessions and has set an example of tolerance which has become a decisive factor in the efforts to ensure peace, stability and the economic progress of our country. Since we gained our independence there have been no religious or inter-ethnic wars or conflicts on the territory of Kazakhstan. This is due to our State policies and geographical and historical background.

Kazakhstan is at the crossroads of Islamic, Christian and Buddhist cultures. Historically, religious diversity came to us along the Great Silk Road. The constitution of our country today provides the society

with the right to freedom of faith and expression, and the State encourages people to advocate and adhere to their own cultures and religions. We have integrated the history of religions and the promotion of tolerance into our school curricula.

Conscious of the critical importance of a dialogue between world religious confessions on key issues of the modern order, Kazakhstan hosted the Second Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in 2006, the text of whose outcome document — the Declaration of the participants of the Congress — was circulated as a document of the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly.

Among other provisions, representatives of practically all traditional and world religions called upon the global community, international and regional organizations, States and Governments to work to establish a more just world, to consolidate international law and justice and to implement United Nations resolutions and signed international agreements. In addition, the Declaration called upon the world community to take concrete collective measures to encourage and highlight positive perceptions of interreligious relations by organizing joint meetings, seminars and addresses in the mass media, the Internet and other places of influence; by strongly promoting interreligious tolerance among younger generations to make them more devoted to dialogue and to encourage them to recognize universal values and integrate questions of dialogue between civilizations and religions into curricula at all educational levels, with a view to helping young people learn to respect and understand religious and cultural differences without hostility.

The Congress has become the vehicle for Kazakhstan's contribution to global dialogue among religions. I would like to reiterate the initiative which the President of Kazakhstan announced in his statement in the General Assembly general debate last week (see A/62/PV.4): to hold the Third Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in 2009 under the auspices of the United Nations. We express our hope that we can count on the full support of the Member States of the United Nations for the implementation of other initiatives of Kazakhstan, including the proposed declaration of one of the coming years as the Year of Dialogue among Religions and Cultures, as stated in General Assembly resolution 61/221, and the planned convening of an international forum entitled "Muslim world — West" at the end of 2008 in Kazakhstan at the level of Ministers for Foreign Affairs.

In conclusion, I would like to state that there are no problems in the world that cannot be solved if we set harmony, tolerance and spirituality against animosity, and if we base our relationships on mutual trust and cooperation. Let us work together to take concrete measures to identify causes of friction and reduce disagreements between nations, cultures and religions.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Heraldo Muñoz, chairman of the delegation of the Republic of Chile.

Mr. Muñoz (Chile) (*spoke in Spanish*): On behalf of Chile, I would like to express my thanks for the convening of this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. This initiative can assist us in dealing with one of the most complex challenges faced by the international community as a whole: promoting respect and understanding among different religions, creeds and cultures.

This is a challenge which requires intense international cooperation. In that connection, various initiatives have been put forward which recognize the equal dignity of all cultures. Among them is the Alliance of Civilizations and its efforts to counteract the rise of terrorism and polarization through an implementation plan focusing on education, the media and youth and migration and whose goal is to help overcome the division between Islam and the West. The two initiatives converge in their respective spheres and can mutually strengthen each other with the necessary coordination.

As noted in the report of the Secretary-General entitled, "Interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace" (A/62/337), UNESCO has underscored the importance of intercultural dialogue for social cohesion, reconciliation and peace and has recognized dialogue as a means of advancing women's human rights.

My country supports the recommendation of the Secretary-General to declare an International Year of Dialogue among Religions and Cultures.

The issue of peaceful coexistence among cultures and religions is not foreign to my country's historical experience. Indeed, Chile is and has been a land of refuge from political and religious persecution. A stanza in our national anthem alludes to that tradition of refuge, saying that Chile is the country of "asylum from oppression". The welcoming of foreigners is, therefore, one of our nation's most deeply rooted traditions.

Our country is home to the largest Palestinian community in the world outside the Middle East. It coexists in harmony with the Jewish community, setting an encouraging example. Various cultural traditions coexist peacefully in Chile against the backdrop of full and equal respect for religious freedom and fundamental freedoms. Churches of various denominations as well as mosques and synagogues operate freely in the country. The same is true in the area of education. The separation of church and State is the guiding principle of our democratic institutions.

The multilateral cultural policy of the Government of President Michelle Bachelet has developed from two basic principles: respect for and setting value on diversity and identity as fundamental prerequisites for positive globalization, and, secondly, the protection, preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage.

Both governmental institutions and individuals must ensure that the media and educational programmes eradicate preconceived and exclusionary ideas. In Chilean schools, we have implemented a school coexistence policy, whose goal is for our sons and daughters to learn to live together by developing the skills, attitudes, values and knowledge necessary for their civic education and to enable them to have respect for diversity.

Chile promotes a vision of society and the world in which culture, respect for diversity and tolerance are prerequisites for ensuring the prevalence of respect for human rights, democracy and development, as well as international peace and security.

Within the framework of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Chile has promoted respect for various cultures and forms of artistic expression in the quest for a better understanding of universal values. In keeping with that political definition, Chile supported the adoption of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. Likewise, at the United Nations, Chile voted in favour of the recent adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

All religions and cultures deserve full respect. Undoubtedly, this is an area in which caution and moderation must be exercised. We recognize that interreligious and intercultural dialogue makes a contribution to peace and harmony, but we believe that that cannot happen at the expense of freedom of expression.

Dialogue among religions and cultures should explore the link to the issue of democracy. Democracy guarantees respect for diversity, tolerance and the rights of all. In addition, evidence shows that conflicts and wars do not generally occur between democracies.

Finally, the contribution that my country can offer today in this forum is to turn our gaze towards a virtue that is characteristic of political coexistence and is present in democratic societies. I am referring to the concept of civic friendship, the respectful relationship that exists in politics — even between adversaries — which places the intrinsic value of a relationship and of mutual appreciation above differences or antagonisms. It is such civic friendship, based on mutual respect, that we believe should preside over the relations among religions and cultures.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. Christian Wenaweser, head of the delegation of Liechtenstein.

Mr. Wenaweser (Liechtenstein): Particularly since the events of 11 September 2001 there has been a growing concern about cross-cultural and interreligious tensions. Some have seen the world inevitably veering towards a clash of civilizations — a confrontation of monolithic, self-contained blocs. In discussing the challenges and opportunities related to intercultural and interreligious dialogue, we must reject a static concept of culture and civilization, as well as the notion that cultures are entities that need to be protected against anything foreign. A culture or civilization constantly evolves over time, adapts to new conditions and settings and is formed in interaction with other cultures and identities.

Embracing a dynamic concept of culture and identity is therefore a precondition for a meaningful

dialogue among civilizations and religions. It requires a willingness to learn and accept that one's own way of looking at and doing things is neither the only way nor, necessarily, the best way. Arrogance has no place in dialogue. In addition, dialogue among civilizations must not be distorted by differences in power: it has to be inclusive, and all participants have to be treated equally. We should take seriously the concern that there is a trend towards the predominance of one culture over the others, brought about by globalization and the present power structure.

Diversity yields many opportunities, but it may be regarded as a threat, because it challenges the ways of life to which we are accustomed and disturbs the comfort that human beings find in stability and the preservation of the status quo.

Owing to globalization, differences among cultures and religions have become starker, as modern communication technologies and fast, affordable forms of transport have led to a world where people of different backgrounds have the daily opportunity and need to interact. Under those circumstances, if we want to create a foundation for cooperation for peace through the fostering of intercultural and interreligious understanding, we will have to find ways to address people's fears and concerns regarding cultural and religious diversity. Education has to play a vital role in that respect.

Another key element is providing forums for dialogue, since one of the best ways to reduce prejudice is for people to get to know and understand one another. Access to the media and to information technology is crucial for that purpose. Bridging the digital divide is thus an important prerequisite for advancing intercultural and interreligious understanding.

Migration often leads to the transformation of relatively uniform communities and societies into multicultural ones and thereby gives rise to new challenges to social coherence and peace. Liechtenstein, for example, has experienced a tremendous influx of immigrants since the end of the Second World War — an influx that has been fuelled mainly by its economic success. With the number of foreigners in our country at 33.9 per cent, the Government and inhabitants of Liechtenstein are confronted with the challenge of interreligious and intercultural understanding on a regular basis.

The Government has taken a series of measures to promote the integration of migrants, to fight xenophobia and racism and to enhance understanding among various cultural and religious groups. One focus of the Government's policy is on the provision of targeted services aimed at enabling migrants to learn the national language. This helps to fulfil one of the basic preconditions for dialogue and socio-economic integration.

Another main concern is the institutionalization of dialogue among all cultural and religious groups in the country. Liechtenstein's Prime Minister has therefore, held several round-table meetings with migrants' associations. As a follow-up, a networking platform for migrants' associations and organizations active in the field of integration and intercultural dialogue has been set up.

As important as measures at the national level may be, the United Nations and other international organizations, such as the Council of Europe, are certainly appropriate forums for establishing an overall dialogue among civilizations and for fostering intercultural and interreligious understanding. Let us join our efforts within those frameworks and develop a common answer to terrorism, intolerance and racism.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. Giancarlo Soler, head of the delegation of Panama.

Mr. Soler Torrijos (Panama) (*spoke in Spanish*): On behalf of my delegation, I thank the President of the General Assembly for convening this meeting.

This year, important international conferences have strengthened the existing consensus about the fundamental principles of understanding between cultures and religions, and their value for peaceful cooperation. We are very glad to acknowledge that fact, even though we lack what is needed to achieve the social implementation of that consensus on a global scale and to make the results that we seek a reality.

The completion of that task requires persistent effort and support at many levels, and this is beyond the capacity of Governments. The effective implementation of that consensus requires a broad mobilization of the citizenry, something that social organizations have the ability to muster, with the plurality of their perspectives and ranges of action.

Of course, promoting tolerance and understanding between cultures and religions is essential to harmonizing relations between nations and social groups. Nevertheless, it is not enough to ensure the presence or maintenance of such tolerance. Fruitful coexistence between people of different cultures and beliefs is strengthened only when expectations and projects are shared and when the people believe that they can achieve those ends through common efforts.

Although cultural and religious disagreements and encounters have their own dynamic, we must examine them together with other factors. As previously stated, rival economic, environmental and territorial interests tend to give rise to tensions that can then be manipulated and exacerbated in the ethnic, cultural and religious arenas. The problem is far more complex when foreign interests are involved. That is why avoiding those interferences and ensuring and encouraging cooperation and synergy to foster a mutually beneficial undertaking will help to bridge the gap between parties.

The recent declaration recognizing the cultural and religious rights of indigenous peoples was a further step in the right direction. In order to promote a more balanced dynamic between the different ethno-cultural actors in a country, it is essential to recognize and value the cultural legacy of the native peoples who, together with the immigrant and Creole populations, enrich and shape the identity of the cultural conglomerate of each nation. Moreover, that recognition is valuable in easing the plight of those who struggle to satisfy other human development needs, such as citizenship, justice and equality of opportunity, which are all elements that mitigate the differences with other social groups.

It is only natural that, after centuries of marginalization, many native peoples should make impassioned demands for the recognition of their culture and beliefs. But this has sometimes kindled resentment and promoted confrontation that damage the socioeconomic integrity and governability of multi-ethnic States. In extreme cases, this leads to civil strife, which does nothing to improve the material and spiritual well-being of affected peoples.

To avoid such a scenario, we must ensure that this recognition can be assumed by everyone, not as a way of exalting our inequities, but as an opportune occasion for coexistence, exchange and an understanding of our differences as opportunities for complementarity in shared projects.

The option of building cooperation-oriented relationships requires us to highlight the many things cultures and religions have in common, as different ways of sustaining similar or compatible moral and humanitarian aspirations. However, in order for that effort to stress what we have in common — or not to stress our differences — we need continuous support from educational systems and the media.

The State has certain responsibilities with regard to the school system, but the media can also contribute constructively in that area. However, with regard to the media, we are generally dealing with private enterprises that frequently invoke their freedom of expression and may be reluctant to follow government guidelines. In such cases, social organizations can play an explanatory and critical role in the effort to eradicate all expressions of racism, xenophobia, intolerance and cultural exclusion.

No one will achieve these objectives on their own. International organizations, Governments and social organizations must all complement each other, together with cultural and religious organizations, in order for peace to become an inclusive and lasting reality.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I call next on His Excellency Mr. Steve Dick Tenyson Mantenje, Chairman of the delegation of Malawi.

Mr. Mantenje (Malawi): Allow me to begin by congratulating the President of the Assembly, for convening this important High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Cooperation and Understanding for Peace. We commend the Philippines and Pakistan for all their efforts and their pivotal role in making this meeting a reality.

The theme of the Dialogue, which is "interreligious and intercultural cooperation for the promotion of tolerance, understanding and universal respect on matters of freedom of religion or belief and cultural diversity", has merit and is worthy of the time reserved for this High-level Dialogue.

Malawi attaches great importance to respect for religious and cultural diversity, particularly in the increasingly globalizing world we live in. We believe that respect for religious and cultural diversity can contribute to international cooperation, peace and

security and promote enhanced dialogue among nations. We therefore call upon the international community to create an environment that is conducive to the exchange of human experience with a view to combating violence, intimidation, hatred and intolerance based on cultural and religious differences, which in turn causes disunity among societies.

The founders of the United Nations envisioned a just and harmonious world when they established our Organization. We cannot achieve such a world through legal, political or military means alone, as we have attempted to during the 62 years of the existence of the United Nations. The contribution of our faiths and cultures is also required to facilitate a more just and harmonious world. Malawi therefore believes that the founders of the United Nations expected that the best parts of our diverse cultures — our religions strengths — would be a tremendous asset in achieving the noble objectives of the United Nations Charter.

Indeed, in the 2005 World Summit Outcome, our leaders acknowledged the diversity of the world and that all cultures and civilizations contribute to the enrichment of humankind. Accordingly, this Dialogue should be seen as yet another opportunity for the international community to continue to explore ways and means of furthering the agenda of promoting international peace and security and encouraging tolerance among different cultures and religions of the world, all of which are unique in their own respects.

Allow me to underline some important considerations that must be taken into account as we map out the way forward in promoting interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace. First, we believe that there is a need to establish education systems that promote respect for diversity; secondly, the media at all levels must support and encourage dialogue in an ethical and responsible manner; and thirdly, countries must promote the effective utilization of information technology in order to promote greater dialogue and understanding, especially among young people. Malawi commends UNESCO for its contribution in that respect.

At the national level, Malawi continues to be committed to the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with particular reference to the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. In that regard, the Malawi Constitution guarantees various fundamental rights, including the right of every person to use the language — and participate in the cultural life — of his or her choice. It also guarantees freedom of association, conscience, opinion and assembly and freedom of the press. In addition, it guarantees to all persons equal and effective protection against discrimination on the grounds of race; colour; sex; language; religion; political or other opinion; national, ethnic or social origin; disability; property; birth; or other status. On the basis of those constitutional provisions, the Malawi Government has progressively formulated policies and enacted laws aimed at creating an enabling environment for the promotion of understanding, tolerance and friendship among the people of Malawi, irrespective of their cultural or religious diversity or language. Further, Malawi is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

While challenges in bringing about complete interreligious and cultural harmony still exist, all religions and cultural sectors in Malawi are committed to peaceful coexistence. That is what has made Malawi a relatively peaceful country since its independence, in 1964.

In conclusion, Malawi supports the recommendation, contained in the Secretary-General's report, that the General Assembly should declare a Year of Dialogue among Religions and Cultures. We share the belief that a peaceful world can be assured only through mutual understanding and interreligious and cultural dialogue. We also support the proposal that a focal unit be established within the Secretariat to follow up on interreligious and cultural issues.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. Basilio Antonio Gutiérrez García, Chairman of the delegation of Cuba.

Mr. Gutiérrez García (Cuba) (*spoke in Spanish*): Today, more than ever before, it is essential to reaffirm the importance of full respect for the political, economic, cultural, social and religious diversity of every nation, in strict conformity with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

In a world characterized by neoliberal globalization, corporatization and privileged consumerism, global power elites impose on others their own cultural patterns as an instrument of their neocolonial policies. Although various initiatives have encouraged respect for cultural diversity and the

promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, today's world bears witness to genocidal wars promoted by the Powers of the North in their voracious pursuit of hegemonic dominance.

Cuba views with great concern the escalation of the grave human rights violations committed in the name of the so-called war on terror, particularly the manifestations of hatred, xenophobia, religious intolerance and discrimination against national, ethnic and religious minorities, which are further exacerbated when the victims are of Arab origin or of the Muslim faith.

The practice in the Western media of projecting a negative image of Islam and the attempt to identify some cultures with terrorism and violence have heightened the ongoing threat to the full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms by persons affiliated with that faith. Compounding the situation is the rise in racist, discriminatory and xenophobic views concerning the superiority of races, cultures and nations — views that have been among the main causes of distressing conflicts throughout history. It is our duty to prevent a repetition of such conflicts.

Given that worrisome reality, it is imperative that we preserve the human race, safeguard the identity of every people and promote a culture of peace based on mutual respect and peaceful coexistence among nations. An important step forward in the attainment of those objectives was the entry into force, on 18 March 2007, of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, adopted by 148 countries, which is a milestone in our joint struggle to preserve the important human right to diversity.

Recently, during the Non-Aligned Movement Ministerial Meeting on Human Rights and Cultural Diversity, held in Iran, the members of the Movement, including Cuba, endorsed the adoption of the Tehran Declaration and Programme of Action, which sets out a series of actions aimed at defending cultural diversity. Likewise, we hope that the international review conference on the implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action will be an important opportunity to discuss this issue within the framework of the global fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

Today, more than ever before, we must reaffirm the right of peoples to self-determination, whereby they freely determine their own political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

Let us work to create a democratic and equitable international order, based on dialogue, cooperation and cultural exchange, that prevents cultural homogenization and the domination of peoples.

Let us promote dialogue among cultures and civilizations and vigorously oppose the pretext of the so-called clash of civilizations, which is used by those who threaten the peace and security of our peoples.

Let us promote international solidarity, without conditions, to promote genuine development of the countries of the South while sharing a common heritage of universal values that are opposed to any irrational hatred among the world's human beings.

Let us work to realize the right to education, according particular importance to education based on a spirit of tolerance and friendship among all human beings, whereby religious diversity, international understanding and peace are respected in a world with equal social justice for all.

Let us utilize communication technologies, including the Internet, to disseminate a message of constructive dialogue and understanding among diverse cultures and civilizations.

Let us work to establish cultural policies that defend our national identities and protect our heritage while promoting mutual enrichment among nations.

Let us advocate the globalization of diversity. Let us demand respect for the rights of minorities, the excluded and the marginalized. By defending understanding among cultures and religions today, we are defending our right to preserve the future of humanity.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to His Excellency Dato' Kamilan Maksom, Chairman of the delegation of Malaysia.

Mr. Maksom (Malaysia): I wish to take this opportunity to express to the President of the General Assembly our appreciation for convening this High-Level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. I also take this opportunity to thank the delegations of the Philippines and Pakistan for initiating this dialogue. We see this as a timely effort at bringing our various

cultures religions and peoples together to engage in dialogue amongst ourselves under the auspices of the United Nations.

Malaysia is fully supportive of efforts at the international level which are designed to generate greater understanding between religions, cultures and civilizations. In fact, we have been involved in efforts to build bridges among religions, cultures and civilizations, including organizing an international interfaith dialogue entitled, "Who speaks for Islam? Who speaks for the West?", which was held in Kuala Lumpur in 2006 and 2007. Additionally, along with Cyprus, Malaysia co-hosted the second annual Asia-Europe Meeting Interfaith Dialogue, held in July 2006. Malaysia was also one of the sponsors of the Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, which was held on 22 June 2005. We are pleased to note the participation of the civil society and including non-governmental organizations and the private sector at those dialogues, which we believe will clearly enhance our mutual efforts towards promoting intercultural, intercivilizational and interreligious understanding. That larger participation also represents the determined will of the international community to cooperate for peace. Indeed, for this sort of dialogue to be successful, the widest range of partners and stakeholders needs to be involved.

Our world continues to be besieged with conflicts among nations and among peoples, despite our progress into modernity and democracy. Cultural and religious differences are said to be the causes of our present-day conflicts; yet we know very well that they are spawned by differences in our particular viewpoints. When we should be celebrating the beauty of diversity among peoples, some, including zealots, distract from this and instead highlight cultural and religious differences and transforming those differences into divisions. Moreover, self-centric societies which view other peoples and cultures from the perspective of their own benchmarks and philosophies while imposing their values onto other societies, contribute to the atmosphere of acrimony and distrust among peoples.

Just as religion is taken to extremes, so too is the notion of democracy, including freedom of speech and expression, which on many occasions is taken to extremes, ignoring the sensitivities and feelings of certain groups of people. The oppression and ill-treatment of certain groups of people by States and, in some cases, by people of different persuasions, as in the case of Palestinian people and Muslim minorities in certain parts of the world, also contribute to the growing among between cultures and religions, particularly between the Western world and Islam.

This dangerous trend of a growing schism among different cultures and religions must be addressed immediately lest it present a serious threat to international peace. We need to bridge this gap and narrow down any differences we have. As a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multireligious country which celebrated 50 years of nationhood of this year, Malaysia understands very well the challenges the world will be confronted with if this dangerous trend is not reversed.

Malaysia believes that the key to bringing all of us closer and to narrowing this gap is to build a culture of respect. Respect for one another will propagate understanding and tolerance; tolerance of our rich diversity will create the understanding needed for us to bridge the gap among our cultures and civilizations.

Malaysia views its role today as part of an intercultural, intercivilizational and interreligious dialogue, where all parties need to ensure that we multiply the bridge-builders and focus on the common values that we share. We need to approach dialogue with mutual respect from all dimensions including ethnicity, culture and religion, as well as with mutual respect for different cultures and nationalities. Political viewpoints should not cloud our common values.

While we work towards fostering dialogue in this high-level forum, of equal if not greater importance is the need to focus on our subsequent work on ensuring that that our interactions at this Dialogue and all other dialogues of this nature flow to the people at the grass-roots level. Our dialogue should be people-centred and people-oriented, rather then State-centric. Our dialogue is too often crouched in political or academic language and terms which become too vague or convoluted. We therefore need to translate our ideas and thoughts into practical measures and ways for the masses to understand and appreciate.

One way is through education. We believe that education is an essential tool towards developing greater understanding and stemming the rising tide of intolerance and distrust. Our youth should be guided into understanding the beauty of our diversity as opposed to its contradictions. The sense of

understanding, tolerance, sensitivity and awareness of other cultures and persuasions must be instilled and fostered in each layer of the society, particularly young people. An intermixing of young minds and ideas through unbiased and responsible guidance would promote a culture of respect, tolerance and understanding. Malaysia is convinced that, through the establishment of more youth cooperation programmes, understanding and the appreciation of the values and beliefs systems of others will be forged.

Malaysia recognizes the important role of the media in promoting in interfaith and intrafaith dialogue. Unfortunately, we note that most international media tend to highlight the differences rather than the commonalities among other cultures and religions. We see the labelling of certain groups of people as counterproductive with respect to building understanding and trust among peoples. This creates confusion rather than clarity.

Labelling furthermore has the potential to be self-prophesizing, since no one specific word can perfectly capture a particular human phenomenon. It is therefore important to use words and language which create confidence and take into account the sensitivities of others, in order to create a culture of respect, understanding and tolerance.

At the same time, the international media must also give sufficient space to voices that speak of harmony, tolerance and moderation. The voices of facilitators and communicators who build bridges of goodwill among cultures and religions must be highlighted to muffle voices of those who preach extremism and hatred.

Malaysia remains committed to efforts, particularly through the United Nations, towards generating respect, understanding and tolerance among cultures, religions and civilizations. We believe that positive interaction among peoples of diverse cultures and values will help to achieve the aim of preserving and promoting global peace, stability and harmony. We are convinced that the culture of peace lies with mutual respect, understanding and tolerance among religions, cultures and peoples.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to Her Excellency Ms. Rosemary Banks, Chairperson of the delegation of New Zealand.

Ms. Banks (New Zealand): New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark said this year that "We do not accept that there is anything inevitable or unavoidable about tension and conflict between ethnicities, cultures and faiths". New Zealand considers that tensions arising from ignorance, unfamiliarity and a lack of understanding can be mitigated by dialogue, by education and by a willingness to learn from and be tolerant of others. That view is encapsulated in General Assembly resolution 61/221 and underpins the holding of this important high-level dialogue, commendably promoted by the Philippines and Pakistan. It is certainly a dialogue that New Zealand supports.

New Zealand's commitment to interfaith and intercultural dialogue is part of our wider response to helping build a more secure and peaceful world. Our involvement in various initiatives, such as the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and the Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue, reinforces our wider regional and global counter-terrorism and peacekeeping efforts.

In May 2007, New Zealand hosted two significant gatherings to advance the global response to interfaith and intercultural issues in a practical way. First, for two days in May, our Prime Minister personally hosted, in coordination with the Government of Norway, a high-level symposium on the report of the High-level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations. As a friend of the Alliance and viewing the Alliance as the most important initiative of its kind, New Zealand wanted the High-level Group's report to receive serious consideration in our Asia-Pacific region.

The symposium succeeded in drawing out those recommendations that have particular potential and relevance for implementation in our region. Participants canvassed regional approaches to cross-cultural education and curriculum development, including through contacts between Islamic studies centres, broader youth exchanges and networks, a new programme of intercultural exchange in the region, media literacy, cross-cultural training for journalists, better engagement with media owners, development of humane migration systems and better integration of migrants into local communities.

New Zealand will be working with regional partners and the Alliance of Civilizations secretariat to promote the symposium's outcomes and the Alliance's

implementation plan within our region. As a first step, New Zealand has recently contributed NZ $50,000 to the Alliance's trust fund, earmarked for projects in South-East Asia.

We are pleased to see that the momentum of the Alliance continues to build in the lead-up to the first Alliance forum in Spain early next year, alongside a global youth forum. New Zealand looks forward to participating actively at those events.

Secondly, later in May this year, New Zealand hosted the third Asia-Pacific Regional Interfaith Dialogue, a process that is co-sponsored by Indonesia, Australia and the Philippines. The Regional Interfaith Dialogue brings together representatives of the major faith and community groups of 15 countries in the South-East Asia region and adjacent South Pacific to explore cooperation and communication and to build understanding and mutual respect among the adherents of our region's different religious faiths.

The Action Plan adopted from that meeting held in Waitangi sets out a range of proposals for practical action. Those include recommendations for improving networking and connections between and within faith communities; recommendations aimed at fostering tolerance and understanding of other religions in both the public and religious education systems and also recommendations to improve the quality and critical stance of the coverage of religious issues in the media.

The inclusion of intra-faith discussions in the Interfaith Dialogue agenda was another key outcome for New Zealand. We see intra-faith discussion as a means to build lasting networks, particularly amongst the region's Muslim communities, which could be a force for moderation and pluralism. While our Regional Interfaith Dialogue is narrower than the inter-civilizational focus of the Alliance, there are a number of useful synergies, and the two processes have — we think — much to contribute to each other. Both promote diversity as a fundamental strength of human society.

New Zealand's effort is only a part of the growing national, regional and international efforts to build, as through this High-level Dialogue, interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace. We commend the important leadership that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization continues to show in that area and welcome the contribution of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding and the Asia-Europe Meeting's Interfaith Dialogue, to name just a few of the many valuable processes now underway.

However, I have to underline the importance of ensuring that our dialogue this week and the other valuable ongoing processes are not simply to the intellectual benefit of those who have the privilege to partake in them. A key outcome from our Auckland symposium was agreement that programmes put in place as a result of those exchanges need to reach beyond the elite and touch those sections of society that will determine whether we can reach our shared goal of building interreligious and intercultural understanding.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Park Hee-kwon, Chairman of the delegation of the Republic of Korea.

Mr. Park Hee-kwon (Republic of Korea): The new circumstances we face today are manifested in a form of competition between integration and confrontation. On the one hand, increasing economic integration driven by modern technology is changing human relations by breaking down barriers of communication and distance. Globalization of that kind is now the defining trend of our world. On the other hand, that major trend is not necessarily ushering in a world of peace and prosperity.

Globalization shows evidence of both a bright and dark face simultaneously. The shortening of distances removes mediating buffer zones between peoples of different backgrounds, which can trigger cultural and social tensions. As an illustration, globalization has met with strong protest in some quarters. It is perceived by many as a means of imposing Western values in non-Western parts of the world. In addition, rising extremism stands in the way of achieving respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all. That dark side, if left unattended, may give rise to misunderstanding and mistrust among different cultures. It is likely to undermine efforts aimed at establishing peace and prosperity.

First and foremost, I believe we must bear in mind that the common denominator of all cultures and religions is a message of love and brotherhood. With that ideal before us, the Republic of Korea welcomes the recent adoption by the Member States of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous

Peoples. My Government believes that the Declaration will contribute to strengthening dialogue among cultures by promoting equality and non-discrimination for all and especially for marginalized indigenous peoples.

Let me turn to the root causes of intercultural misunderstanding, namely, poverty, human rights violations and a disregard for the danger of armed conflicts; the historical fault lines of race, religion and cultural traditions also encourage mutual distrust. In order to further our common goals of tolerance, mutual understanding and the observance of human rights, the United Nations must root out the potential causes of hostility. In that sense, revitalizing multilateralism is critical to addressing our shared challenges. The United Nations is the best vehicle for that process.

However, our efforts to avoid potential misunderstandings have been slow, given the urgent need for dialogue among cultures and civilizations. That said, the United Nations system should be more inclusive and open to civil society. Dealing with this particular challenge will be difficult, requiring partnerships between stakeholders. We must strengthen cooperation between all actors, including Governments, international organizations and the institutions of civil society. An all-inclusive United Nations system intent on alliance-building with distant branches of the world community — and especially with institutions in civil society such as religious groups — can play a role in tracking and dissolving the essential causes of distrust.

The good news is that initiatives in this direction, such as the Alliance of Civilizations, are beginning to take hold. Indeed, we welcome initiatives such as the Alliance and support cooperation with the United Nations system.

Given the limited resources for our endeavours, we must set priorities when implementing any such initiatives. The report of the High-level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations recommended that we focus attention on such issues as immigration, youth, politics and education.

Furthermore, initiatives for dialogue among civilizations should be planned and implemented in a way compatible with system-wide coherence in the United Nations system. This will not only avoid duplication, but also enhance the effectiveness of these endeavours.

As part of my Government's effort to encourage dialogue among world youth, the Republic of Korea is planning to hold a youth forum alongside the second World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, to be held in 2009 and co-sponsored by the United Nations. I hope the Conference will provide an opportunity for world youth to deepen their mutual understanding.

We live in challenging times. With the advance of globalization, economic integration can heighten cultural friction. Managing these stresses in such a way that they do not slip out of control is a daunting task. Merely recognizing the need for and the merits of dialogue is not sufficient. Strong political will is required. The Republic of Korea believes that peacebuilding, the achievement of the Millennial Development Goals and respect for human rights should be the bedrock on which to forge a fair and mutual understanding among all the peoples of the world.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. Gilles Noghès, Chairman of the delegation of Monaco.

Mr. Noghès (Monaco) (*spoke in French*): Dialogue between civilizations must be recognized as a fundamental principle with regard to establishing and maintaining tolerant and peaceful relations between people from different traditions, cultures or religions.

It is surprising that it took 20 centuries of our conventional era before the importance of cultural diversity was recognized. How is it conceivable that people still sometimes set freedom and tolerance in opposition to each other? According to the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which that no one else. Emmanuel Lévinas said, in a remarkable manner, that liberties, far from being in conflict, call out to each other and mutually awaken each other. In fact, the coexistence of liberties rests on the principle of tolerance.

We must recognize differences and respect them. At the same time we should know how to condemn violence without drawing false parallels. Terrorism should not in any way be allowed to lead to the interruption of dialogue or to intolerance. When Jean-Paul Sartre says "Hell is other people", he meant that each person is the torturer of the other, by constantly subjecting them to judgment. We must leave this hell.

to which we are led by misunderstandings and the absence of dialogue.

Our delegation aligns itself with the statement by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Portugal, who, speaking on behalf of the European Union, mentioned resolution 61/161, adopted by consensus last year by this Assembly, on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, as an example of a commitment aiming at guaranteeing that fundamental freedom.

We also fully subscribe to the initiative presented by Spain and Turkey in support of the Alliance of Civilizations.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. Joe Pemagbi, Chairman of the delegation of Sierra Leone.

Mr. Pemagbi (Sierra Leone): The delegation of Sierra Leone welcomes the opportunity to participate in this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. We take note with appreciation of the report of the Secretary-General on interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and peace (A/62/337) and the report of the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, 2001-2010 (A/62/97). The involvement of civil society in those activities and their participation in this dialogue should serve as a reminder of the fact that the promotion of understanding, peace and cooperation is not the exclusive prerogative of Governments.

This dialogue should, first of all, serve as a reminder of our obligations under the Charter of the United Nations and the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in particular to promote and encourage respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.

Secondly, we should remind ourselves that the United Nations is itself the epitome of intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace.

Here we are, in this great Hall, and under one dome, as representatives of the peoples of the world: men and women of all races from almost 200 nations, representing peoples of all beliefs and shades of unbelief, speaking hundreds of languages and dialects. In spite of political and other differences, and sometimes communicating in discordant tones, we try to interact, to respect one another, to tolerate one another and, to paraphrase the Charter, to practise tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours.

Tolerance is one of the seven national values of Sierra Leone. In spite of its status in the international system of economic and social development, Sierra Leone enjoys one of the highest levels of religious tolerance in the world today. Indeed, Sierra Leone is a model of interreligious understanding. As former President Kabbah once observed in a Ramadan message to the nation, "Those who want to see religious tolerance at its best, let them come to Sierra Leone." In a few days' time, in connection with Eid al-Fitr, the end of the holy month of Ramadan, Muslims and Christians in Sierra Leone will all join in the celebration of Ramadan. Major religious observances such as the feasts of Eid al-Adha, Good Friday, Easter, Christmas and Ramadan are national holidays in Sierra Leone. It is not uncommon for a Christian and Muslim couple to perform the rites of holy matrimony in a church or in a mosque. I should add that virtually every public meeting opens with short Muslim and Christian prayers. We are proud of those practices, because they help to promote respect, tolerance and understanding.

In our view, religion should, as far as possible, be used as an instrument of national development. We acknowledge the important role that religious institutions and denominations have played and are still playing in the establishment and maintenance of primary and secondary schools in Sierra Leone. We have also used religion positively as an instrument of peace, healing, reconciliation and national cohesion, especially in connection with the 11-year rebel war. For instance, the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone made a significant contribution to the peace process.

We acknowledge that education, like religion, can be a powerful tool for promoting peace and cooperation. Having emerged from armed conflict, Sierra Leone has found it necessary to create and implement a number of peace education programmes and projects. For instance, as indicated in paragraph 3 of the report prepared by the Director-General of UNESCO in connection with activities for the

International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World, the agency has coordinated a project on integrating peace and intercultural understanding in formal and non-formal education programmes. We support the recommendation in the report for increasing educational efforts to develop curricula, textbooks and activities that teach cultural and religious tolerance.

Peace education has also been developed at the tertiary education level. In cooperation with the University of Bradford in the United Kingdom, we now have a peace and conflict studies degree-granting programme at the University of Sierra Leone. The programme needs further support to strengthen its curriculum in the areas of conflict prevention and management, including indigenous or transitional forms of conciliation and resolution.

In the area of non-formal public education, the National Commission for Democracy and Human Rights is also demonstrating the importance of education in promoting peace and understanding in Sierra Leone. Established during the course of the armed conflict, the Commission is the leading institution for educating the public about the Constitution, democratic principles and the promotion of a culture of peace, tolerance, reconciliation, respect for others' values, patriotism and loyalty to the State. The objectives of the Commission are, in effect, consistent with conflict prevention.

Sierra Leone believes that the media constitute one of the most potent instruments for the promotion of intercultural understanding, cooperation and peace. Unfortunately, in a few unfortunate instances, the media at both the national and international levels have, consciously or unconsciously, fanned the flames of intolerance. After all, irrespective of our professions and our national and corporate interests, we are tenants of one world. We are all potential victims of the consequences of intolerance, especially extreme forms of religious, ethnic and cultural intolerance.

My delegation therefore endorses the recommendation contained in the report of the UNESCO Director-General, urging the media, at the international and national levels, to support the global campaign for a culture of peace and a dialogue among civilizations, cultures and peoples.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Anwar Toman Barout Saleem Al Barout, chairman of the delegation of the United Arab Emirates.

Mr. Al Barout (United Arab Emirates) (*spoke in Arabic*): It gives me pleasure at the outset to express on behalf of the United Arab Emirates our thanks and appreciation for the President's remarkable efforts in guiding the work of this session. We are confident that his expertise and skills will effectively contribute to the successful achievement of the General Assembly's objectives.

Historical events have proven that the continuation of some cases of aggression, occupation, violence, contradictions, imbalances and cultural and economic hegemony of developed States against developing nations have exacerbated the feelings of injustice, inequality and marginalization among the peoples of some of those developing nations. Those feelings were associated with new forms of hostility and mistrust among communities. They provided the breeding grounds for the emergence of new security threats, including extremism, terror, violence and revenge. This prompts us, now more than ever, to endeavour to contain the root causes of those phenomena, reverse the growing disparities among communities and enhance closeness and rapprochement among these communities in accordance with the principles of transparency, justice and equality, as called for in the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The United Arab Emirates has supported all efforts by the Secretary-General and by States and Governments to reinforce the concept of dialogue among civilizations and promote a culture of peace and respect for religions. Our State was among the first to lend its strong support to the Alliance of Civilizations, an initiative launched by the Secretary-General in 2005. We made a contribution of $1 million for strengthening its mechanisms on the basis of our belief in the need to mobilize international, collective and concerted action to create a new global environment in which all States are able to live peacefully.

The United Arab Emirates, which believes in the principle of respect for human dignity and the rights and beliefs of all human beings without exception according to the teachings of Islam, has enacted the necessary legislation and regulations for protecting the fundamental rights and freedoms of all its inhabitants,

including all residents and foreigners working in the United Arab Emirates, regardless of their nationality, religion, language or origin. Convinced that science, culture and knowledge are the foundations for the progress of nations and the cornerstones for the building of human civilization, the United Arab Emirates has implemented a number of initiatives in order to strengthen its cultural ties with the rest of the world. Among those initiatives was the $2 million Zayed book award, designed to motivate and encourage outstanding writers and intellectuals who contribute to various fields of Arab culture and human culture as a whole. Efforts were also made to bring the experience of the world's most prestigious universities and museums to the United Arab Emirates by, for example, launching the Sorbonne Abu Dhabi University and inaugurating the Louvre Abu Dhabi and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi museums. The Emirates Foundation was also established, in order to raise our educational, technological, intellectual and research resources to the highest global level.

The United Arab Emirates has also hosted several meetings, conferences and workshops in order to promote the exchange of knowledge, expertise and culture and advance interreligious and intercultural dialogue and understanding. We have participated in bilateral, regional and international programmes aimed at achieving concerted action to bring together peoples of different cultures and civilizations and to strengthen tolerance, respect and dialogue among them.

Our State's interest in promoting intercultural dialogue extends beyond the national level to include direct contributions for the protection of the common heritage of mankind. Further, initiatives undertaken include: the humanitarian cultural initiative launched three days ago by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashed Al Maktoum, our Vice-President and Prime Minister, whose goals is to educate one million children in the poor regions of the world; the election last June of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee in charge of implementing the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage; the biennial $150,000 Zayed award for heritage, under the auspices of UNESCO, which aims at promoting human activity and protecting all forms of cultural heritage, including the preservation of masterpieces of traditional, folkloric and other intangible and endangered heritage in the world; the cultural weeks organized in various capitals in the world to introduce the long-standing cultural traditions and achievements of the United Arab Emirates; the international Culture Village established in Dubai to host various culturally diverse museums, exhibitions and theatres from all over the world; the Sultan Bin Ali Al Owais Cultural Foundation, which supported and honoured various national, Arab and international eminent personas for their literary, cultural and humanitarian achievements; and specialized international seminars and exhibitions organized every year by the workshop on culture and science since 1978.

The Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage is also in charge of developing cultural policies, plans and programmes with a view to preserving, developing and promoting the cultural identity of the United Arab Emirates at the international level. The Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research issues publications, reports and studies in English and Arabic and organizes annual conferences, seminars and workshops to promote scientific, informational, cultural and research exchange and to cooperate with different regional and international research centres in serving the objectives of cultural rapprochement in all areas of human relations.

In conclusion, we endorse the report of the High-level Group for the Alliance of Civilizations established by the Secretary-General and its important political views on the pressing nature of the Palestinian question, which is the main factor behind the widening gap between Muslim and Western societies today. We call upon the General Assembly, to pay serious heed to the recommendations of the High-level Group, which demand that Israel accept and facilitate the process of establishing an independent and viable Palestinian State, living side by side with Israel in peace and security, in accordance with international law and the relevant legitimate resolutions. In this way, the state of hostility and conflict in the region can be ended, and we can avoid its negative consequences, which have been the leading cause of the outbreak of violence, incitement and tension, not only in the Middle East, but in many different regions in recent years. In this context, we would also like to stress the need to compel Israel to halt all measures aimed at obliterating Palestinian cultural and national identity in the occupied territories, including its ongoing attempts to ravage religious, educational and cultural sites,

foremost among which are Al-Quds Al-Sharif and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which constitute a flagrant violation of the provisions of international law, human rights and the principle of cultural diversity.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. Prasad Kariyawasam, chairman of the delegation of Sri Lanka.

Mr. Kariyawasam (Sri Lanka): The High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace is taking place at an opportune moment. The decision by the General Assembly to convene this event is a manifestation of the interest of the international community and the United Nations in promoting a dialogue on this important issue. Let me take this opportunity to congratulate the delegations of Pakistan and the Philippines on spearheading the adoption of resolution 61/269, which paved the way for this event. This initiative will no doubt build on several similar initiatives undertaken by the United Nations in the recent past, including the dialogue among civilizations.

The fact that this meeting takes place on the eve of the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and at the commencement of the sixty-second session of the General Assembly makes it doubly significant.

We humans inherently possess both diverse and common values and ethics based on specific circumstances and age-old traditions. While the commonality of our beliefs can unite us, the diversity of our views and traits can enrich our knowledge and life experience. Our diversity therefore need not be a cause for division or conflict.

As human civilization began to advance, the great teachers and messengers of peace identified, in the very early years of human advancement, the need for human beings to cooperate for coexistence and to promote peace in society and community. All predominant religions in the world have, at their core, compassion and the promotion of peace. It is within that framework that the international community needs to focus on interreligious and intercultural cooperation for peace, and it is timely that this Assembly is giving a sense of direction to this dialogue.

The key to success is promoting common values and aspects in all religions and cultural traditions that promote understanding between cultures and religions and engender respect for diversity and for others. In this effort it is essential to emphasize the word "tolerance" in its broadest possible sense. Tolerance implies our respect for the unknown and even empathizing with dislike. Several great religions in the world have taught us the essence of tolerance in different manifestations.

My country, Sri Lanka, in its 2,500-year recorded history, has remained multicultural and multireligious. The creed of tolerance taught in Buddhism has been ingrained in our society ever since the teachings of the Buddha took root in my country under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka of India. Tolerance and compassion towards the other has been the key to our civilization. As an island nation, it has been our tradition to welcome all new ideas and influences and to integrate new trends into our society, complementing what already exists and promoting understanding of and cooperation with the new. Religious diversity has never been a cause for division. In fact, in Sri Lanka it is common to find Buddhist temples, Christian churches, Muslim mosques and Hindu temples within close proximity of one another and often on the same street. They coexist in harmony, with the worshippers at each shrine assisting the others. Tolerance of others' religions is a tradition that we hold dear.

While Buddhism, the predominant religion in my country, has contributed to the mainstream ethos in Sri Lanka, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and other religions have coexisted with it and have enriched the values of our people, thus making interreligious cooperation and understanding a fact of everyday life. The key to that trend has been the tolerance and understanding displayed by those who adhere to the various religions in my country.

It is essential that we understand the unity of thought and the essence of truth in all major religions, which promote similar values for the good of human beings. No religion promotes hurting others for any purpose. For example, Buddhism says, "Do not hurt others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful". Taoism says, "Regard your neighbour's gain as your own gain and your neighbour's loss as your own loss". Christianity says, "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them". Confucius says, "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you". Islam says, "Do unto all men as you would they should do unto you, and reject for others what you would reject for yourself".

Hinduism says, "Let no one do to others what he would not have done to himself".

In this age of exponentially advancing technology and interconnectedness, there is a tendency for predominant economic and political power to manifest itself as a force of cultural domination, overwhelming vulnerable and weak societies. This trend, when perceived as unwelcome, can act against understanding and cooperation, thus causing societies and peoples to become militant. It is therefore essential to be sensitive to such phenomena and to take cognizance of the right of every individual, every community and every society to stand on its own and to cooperate and understand of its own volition.

In that context, we welcome the Dialogue taking place today in the General Assembly. It is our belief that frank exchanges of views on all aspects of religious and cultural commonality and diversity will help the peoples of our globalizing world to promote peace and understanding.

We have just celebrated the International Day of Non-Violence in the General Assembly as a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi, in recognition of his efforts to spread the creed of non-violence throughout the modern world. It is auspicious that this meeting is taking place in the wake of that event. A view that he expressed is very relevant to our discourse today:

> "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."

Those words of Mahatma Gandhi sum up the approach that we need in order to promote interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation for peace.

The Acting President (*spoke in Spanish*): I now call on His Excellency Mr. Youcef Yousfi, chairman of the delegation of Algeria.

Mr. Yousfi (Algeria) (*spoke in French*): Algeria welcomes the holding of this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace, particularly since it is taking place within the United Nations, which remains the natural framework for dialogue among civilizations, the melting pot of cultures and the irreplaceable rostrum for opinions that characterize the human family.

Mr. Kiriyawasam (Sri Lanka), Vice-President, took the Chair.

What are the results of the implementation of the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations, adopted in 2001? What is the state of interreligious dialogue and, by extension, the dialogue among cultures and civilizations in a globalized world that, as noted by the Chinese professor Tu Wei-ming, is obviously far from being a place where dialogue, harmony and peace prevail?

How do we oppose the culture of ignorance, scorn for others, stereotypes, discrimination based on culture and religion, deliberate equivocation, supporters of the clash of civilizations, defamation of religions, and racist and xenophobic political platforms and statements, which are, quite simply, insults to human intelligence?

Interreligious dialogue is essential to prevent the development of disastrous wars between religions, which, because they share a sense of the sacred, all bear messages of peace, tolerance and salvation.

It is particularly unfortunate to note that, in today's world, many prejudices have clouded the understanding of Islam by suggesting that that religion of peace is synonymous with oppression, intolerance, extremism and terrorism, whereas it preaches respect and values dialogue.

In the holy Koran and in the Sunna, interreligious dialogue and the right of every individual to freedom of thought and religion are unequivocally affirmed. Islam considers variety and human diversity to be assets, and people are invited to move beyond mere coexistence and to actively seek to engage in dialogue and to develop relationships of mutual assistance and solidarity.

As a result of its geographic situation, my country lies at the crossroads of several civilizations. That situation has given us an openness to others and a broad perspective on world affairs.

Algeria, which witnessed the birth and accomplishments of the great thinker and philosopher Saint Augustine, who made contributions to universal progress and, more specifically, to the development of Western thought, has always supported human endeavours to promote the culture of peace, dialogue among civilizations and interreligious understanding and to enshrine cultural diversity.

My country, which endorses the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations, adopted by resolution 56/6, took an active part, through the person of His Excellency President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in the International Conference on the Dialogue among Civilizations, Cultures and Peoples, held on 5 April 2005 at UNESCO headquarters, and expresses its support for the Alliance of Civilizations initiative. Algeria hopes that that initiative will be able to make an effective, practical, frank and courageous contribution to our collective efforts for peace, understanding and tolerance. We welcome the recent appointment of the High Representative for the Alliance.

Algeria also believes that any idea of dialogue and cooperation would be meaningless if the international community does not at the same time address the imperative of socio-economic development. To that end, it is urgent that the international community tackle poverty, underdevelopment and environmental degradation, which are universal scourges that transcend cultural differences.

Any idea of dialogue must be long-term and must be affirmed as an ongoing means of bringing people and communities closer together and spreading the culture of peace everywhere and at all levels.

Before concluding, I wish to reiterate my country's gratitude to UNESCO's Culture Sector, particularly its Interreligious Dialogue programme, but also to its Education and Social and Human Sciences sectors, which remain the best defences against ignorance and conflict and natural vehicles for humanism, critical reason, harmony and peace. Certainly much has been done to bring human beings closer to each other, to dispel misunderstanding and to avoid prejudgments. However, much remains to be done. We have the necessary tools but we must all show greater commitment and responsibility.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to Her Excellency Mrs. Adiyatwidi Adiwoso Asmady, chairperson of the delegation of Indonesia.

Mrs. Asmady (Indonesia): Allow me to join others in expressing appreciation for the convening of this High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. That this event is taking place at such a level is indicative of the importance attached to the issue. We share that view.

Indonesia is convinced that dialogue among nations helps in the cultivation of a culture of peace. That is why Indonesia has always been an enthusiastic supporter of dialogue among civilizations as a way of bringing the peoples of the world closer together. We see dialogue as an essential tool for building bridges between faiths and cultures. At the grass roots, it is an effective tool for peace if it is carried out intensively and extensively.

Since tension and conflict may arise not only between those who profess different religions but also between factions within the same religion, intrafaith dialogue should also be encouraged in order to foster harmony among those who profess the same religion.

Indonesia is committed to promoting interreligious and intercultural understanding and cooperation. We have a centuries-old tradition of dialogue called "musyawarah", which means consultation, and "mufakat", which stands for consensus. The practice of consultation and consensus-seeking has been our way of dealing with pluralism and bringing it to the benefit of everyone. That is how we have sustained our cultural diversity without sacrificing national unity.

As a result of that outlook and in a country of great diversity and size, we see diversity as a blessing, not a disadvantage. Although it is also capable of leading to misunderstanding and tension, in such cases we are able to take advantage of those traditional tools as well as modern ones.

One of the modern tools is education, which is essential in promoting harmony in diversity. A good education teaches children about unity and common threads. It emphasizes that differences in theology and cultural traditions do not make anyone inferior or preclude people from living and working together in peace.

That is why the Ministry of Religion in Indonesia is conducting courses for teachers in Islamic boarding schools on the subject of religious and cultural diversity. The objective is to teach how to foster an open-minded view of pluralism in the country. We want to stress the consciousness that diversity should be embraced and celebrated.

Indonesia's dialogue on the issue is also reflected in our regional and interregional engagements, such as the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). We are also promoting it on a bilateral basis with countries of different religious and cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, the Government supports the efforts of non-governmental actors working in various areas to promote interreligious harmony. In recent times, we have had the International Conference of Islamic Scholars, which was sponsored by Nandlatul Ulama, the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, and the World Peace Forum, which was hosted by Muhammadiyah, the second largest Muslim organization in the country.

We also see mass media as a partner in that endeavour because it is the daily intermediary between people and ideas. I am glad to say that the mass media in Indonesia is mindful of the need to promote interreligious and intercultural harmony. As a matter of strategy, we are happy to involve the media in our efforts to promote dialogue.

We recognize that no matter what is done, society will always have some elements of conflict and tension. That is normal: it is the nature of all human society. Rather than be discouraged, we must continue to work hard to encourage, inspire and promote harmony. The situation calls not for cynicism, but for greater investment of imagination and effort.

As for the way forward, we believe that more efforts should be made at the national level to promote conscious actions to create harmony among communities and to undertake appropriate education forums.

Non-governmental organizations and the media should play an important role in bringing people of different backgrounds closer together. At the international level, we hope the United Nations will institutionalize interfaith and intercultural initiatives and strengthen the role of the relevant agencies on the issue. We also stress the importance of resolving major international disputes, especially where they involve friction between religions and faiths.

It is our fervent hope that this dialogue will not only complement but also strengthen other initiatives that build bridges of understanding and goodwill essentially forming a universal web of conversation and cooperation among people of different beliefs and cultural backgrounds in the common interest of all humankind.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Nebojša Kaludjerović, chairman of the delegation of Montenegro.

Mr. Kaludjerović (Montenegro): I would like first of all to express my appreciation to the President for the convening of this important meeting. I would also like to thank the Philippines and Pakistan for their commendable initiative in creating this dialogue. We find that the preservation and enhancement of the interreligious and intercultural legacy present a practical contribution to the need to abbreviate the road from an idea to its implementation.

Today's High-level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace is in this regard a very well-focused forum. As we are all well aware, ideas alone are often insufficient. We are fully confident that the United Nations is an excellent framework for the best practical and creative development of intercultural and interfaith cooperation among various nations. The United Nations possesses the confidence of its Member States to be the right forum for addressing differences of various traditions in spiritual and religious matters. That is best shown in the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has remained an inspiration for all of us for the past six decades.

Cultural and interreligious interactions strengthen relationships between the United Nations and civil society. That kind of strong involvement is essential to the topics we are discussing today.

Montenegrin culture belongs to the millennia-old circles of the Mediterranean, the cradle of civilization. Its place in this tremendously dynamic and vibrant part of the world has never been a petrified or a dull one. We have witnessed constant streams of events and changes which have added to the image of the society that we all share today in Montenegro. I quote Fernand Braudel:

> "Our sea was from the very dawn of its protohistory a witness to those imbalances productive of exchange which would set the rhythm of its entire life."

I believe that that most excellently depicts the actual Mediterranean fabric into which my nation has been woven.

Montenegro is a country possessing genuine multi-ethnic and multiconfessional understanding. That is one of our most prominent values, which we have cherished and striven to safeguard and promote. I should recall that during the turbulent last decade of the twentieth century, Montenegro remained a safe haven of multi-ethnic and multireligious tolerance and accord in a region where abuses and atrocities were very often committed in the name of religion. The coexistence and mutual respect of Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Islam helped us to save lives, peace and our land.

As the Montenegrin President stated at the Regional Summit of Heads of State of South-East Europe, held in Bucharest in June under the auspices of UNESCO, "Harmony of religious and ethnic relations is the greatest treasure of Montenegro". We are therefore bound to preserve and enhance this legacy, working together not only in Montenegro, but with our neighbours in the Balkan region — which, at this very moment, must show its readiness for the European perspective that is so obvious. In that regard we welcome and support the Euro-Mediterranean Barcelona process and the proposed 2008 European Year of Intercultural Dialogue as an expression of European mobilization to continue with the dialogue among cultures.

Let me also emphasize the importance of the Alliance of Civilizations, which in our view presents an exceptional framework for developing national and international strategies and action plans. By becoming a member of the Group of Friends of the Alliance of Civilizations, Montenegro, a small Mediterranean and European country which for a millennium has engaged in intercultural and interfaith discourse, can contribute to the development of this process. Intercultural and interreligious understanding lays the basis for cooperation in many other areas such as the economy, industry, tourism and political and public life.

We are of the view that the main messages stemming from this forum should lead to finding concrete modalities for putting the ideas of the Dialogue into practice. In doing so we have, among other things, to bring these messages to the younger generations, as suggested in the conclusions of the Alliance of Civilizations, since young people are important and active promoters of dialogue. In this context, education represents a very significant part of the process of enabling young people to engage in intercultural and interreligious exchange; I cannot stress enough the importance that my country attaches to that.

Montenegro is ready to be the host and promoter of relevant programmes and activities which should lead to an increased understanding of the variety of cultures and religions. Only by reaching out to accept diversity can we become a real partner of the modern world.

The Acting President: I now give the floor to His Excellency Mr. Abdullah Ahmed Mohamed Al-Murad, chairman of the delegation of Kuwait.

Mr. Al-Murad (Kuwait) (*spoke in Arabic*): I would like at the outset to thank the President for convening this High-Level Dialogue on Interreligious and Intercultural Understanding and Cooperation for Peace. I am totally convinced that the dialogue among societies and nations contributes to a culture of peace.

I was pleased yesterday to chair panel discussion 2, on best practices and strategies on interreligious and intercultural cooperation going forward. The discussion was positive and useful, and we believe that it will help lead to mutual understanding, trust and agreement with a view to attaining lasting peace.

During the last 10 days of the holy month of Ramadan, I would like to extend my greetings and best wishes to all Muslims and to believers of other religions.

For several years now, cultural and religious differences and conflicts have raged and, if left unchecked, could pose a threat to international peace and security and a direct threat to human civilization. This could also lead to destruction and to planting fear and terror in human hearts. Religious conflicts bear the seeds of destruction; if we turn the pages of history, we can see that religious differences have often been a source of conflict and war.

All religions promote similar spiritual and moral principles and ideals, common values that promote cooperation and peace. Islam, for example, recognizes the multiplicity and diversity of ethnic groups, races and genders. God says in the Koran,

> "O mankind, we created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that you might know each other. Verily, the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is he who is the most righteous among you."
> (*XLIX:13*)

We believe that other religions are based on those same principles and values. We should therefore work together to transform the world's culture from one of war to one of peace through dialogue and understanding, not through threats and killing. This dialogue should take place, not only at the international level, but also at the national level, and not only in theory, but also in practice.

We should recognize that dialogue between peoples and religions will contribute to understanding, friendship and good relations and has a major role to play in strengthening international peace and security. We believe that dialogue and cooperation between religions has today become an integral part of the political scene. We should recognize that to accept religious and cultural diversity and to strive for a culture of peace, openness and respect for the religions, traditions and cultures of others, we must establish internal mechanisms and provide the necessary resources to fight violence and intolerance against other ethnicities, religions and races, while respecting the belief systems and creeds of others. Strengthening an approach of moderation between religions will ensure the realization of a great measure of understanding. The Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs of Kuwait has adopted and is strengthening such a moderate approach, in accordance with Government directives and guidelines. Kuwait has held several international conferences on the subject of moderation in Islam, including one held in November of last year in Washington, D.C., attended by 100 Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. The conference discussed the dangers of extremism and the importance of strengthening moderation in all religions and promoting religious tolerance.

I am pleased to mention that yesterday, 4 October, the Foreign Affairs Council of the Gulf sent a peace and friendship message to all States. It stresses the urgent need to engage in religious tolerance and to combat extremism. That message conveys our work in spreading religious tolerance, which is the key to peace and understanding around the world. We stress the acceptance of others on the basis of mutual respect for and understanding of others.

Discrimination and doubts that confront Muslims are a problem everywhere and are a major concern to us, because it distorts the image of Islam and undermines relations with other faiths and creeds. Recent reports have documented an increase in incidents prompted by fear of Islam and of foreigners and in hate crimes against Muslims. The negative political discourse in the media against Islam and Muslims in the West complicates things even further. Linking terrorism to Islam is unacceptable because it exacerbates xenophobia in the West against Muslims and Islam. Millions of Muslims living in the West who were already deprived of opportunities in their own countries of origin have become targets for discrimination and hatred and are increasingly marginalized.

Allow me to recall here that there are no legal restrictions on freedom of expression, but freedom of expression must be exercised responsibly and wisely, without affecting the sensitivities of others, especially in the multicultural societies of today. It is a question of wisdom and responsibility; it is not a legal issue. Any expression that affects others in the name of freedom is considered irresponsible and provocative and could generate negative emotions and reactions.

If the leaders of religious societies truly and effectively participate in deepening the understanding of other religions, civilizations and cultural organizations, it should be possible to find among those religions the common noble values that would allow them to lead their societies towards peace, tolerance and mutual understanding. Religions are the solution and not part of the problem; religious leaders need to prove that.

The Islamic Cultural Centre of New York, which it is my honour to preside over, is the largest Islamic association in New York. It works and strives to cooperate with others in good will. It would like to make itself known to others; that is why it has organized a series of dialogues and symposia on religions, such as the tri-partite dialogue held last November, bringing together Jews, Christians and Muslims. It commemorated Martin Luther King, Jr., Day last year. We also participated in the Imams and Rabbis conference on peace in Spain in March of 2005. The Islamic Council also sponsored the tripartite

dialogue with the main New York church and synagogue. The Council has also promoted and contributed considerably to financing that meeting in its continuous efforts to build bridges of friendship between people and to deepen the roots of love and tolerance among all.

In conclusion, allow me to reaffirm my country's commitment to the strengthening of dialogue between all religions and cultures so that peace and tolerance can prevail.

The meeting rose at 1.30 p.m.